

One Cut, One Life

A FILM BY LUCIA SMALL AND ED PINCUS

Documentary / 105 min / English / 2014 / Digital (DCP and BluRay)



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Synopsis

When seminal documentary filmmaker Ed Pincus (*Black Natchez*, *Diaries: (1971-1976)*, *The Axe in the Attic*), considered the father of first-person nonfiction film, is diagnosed with a terminal illness, he and his collaborator Lucia Small (*My Father*, *The Genius*, *The Axe in the Attic*) team up to make one last film. *One Cut, One Life* is an intense, frank, and sometimes humorous exploration of the human condition that invites the viewer to contemplate what is important, not only at the end of life, but through all phases of live and creative pursuits.

Before his death in November 2013, Ed and Lucia fulfilled their long-discussed idea for a personal documentary told from two separate points of view – two filmmakers, two worlds. This final collaboration –fueled by an urgent certainty– navigates discussions of mortality, love, loss and legacy with palpable vulnerability and piercing intimacy rarely seen in non-fiction. From the perspectives of their different backgrounds, generations, genders, and classes, each filmmaker captures the challenging and delicate territory of Ed's unfolding illness, Lucia's bereavement in the wake of the sudden, violent deaths of two close friends, along with Ed's wife Jane's on-again, off-again resistance to the project.

Both filmmakers commit to including the disturbing and squeamish aspects inherent in their endeavor, and in doing so, provoke questions about what might be too private to be made public. In this unified effort, they pursue a shared ideal that autobiographical film can challenge comfortable assumptions about limits of propriety and good taste, and perhaps overthrow them. Through their all-out commitment to the film and their friendship, *One Cut, One Life* gives the viewer access not only to what the film meant to its creators, to their bodies of work, and to first-person nonfiction film, but also to the daring and fiery impulses of human creativity.

Filmmaker Biographies

Although many young filmmakers today may not know his name, **Ed Pincus** is considered a pioneer of documentary filmmaking, particularly in the first-person autobiographical form. A Brooklyn street kid who eventually made his way to the Ivy League, Ed founded the MIT Film Lab in the late 60s, which became a hub of innovative and groundbreaking work and sparked a generation of critical filmmakers. Known for his innovations in film and technical contributions to the field, Ed is also the author of *Guide to Filmmaking* which evolved into *The Filmmaker's Handbook* (co-authored with Steven Ascher) a key textbook in film studies programs nationwide. Ed made several social issue, direct cinema films, including *Black Natchez* and *Panola* before embarking on his magnum opus: *Diaries (1971-1976)*, an exploration of his open marriage and life during this time. At the peak of his film career, Ed abruptly left his community in Cambridge, MA and moved his family to Vermont. Eventually, Ed gave up filmmaking entirely and started a commercial flower farm which he ran for over 20 years before a chance meeting with Lucia compelled him to return to film.

Lucia Small, 25 years Ed's junior, is a former artist and activist turned documentary filmmaker. A Californian native, Lucia moved to Boston in the early nineties where she worked as a producer, editor, and assistant director in both fiction and non-fiction film. In late 2002, after a successful festival run with her directorial documentary debut *My Father, The Genius*, she and Ed met while on a film jury. For four days, they watched and judged films and discovered similar sensibilities despite their diverse paths and histories. Ed was excited to meet a person of a younger generation who was not afraid to venture into provocative and risky artistic endeavors. Self-taught, Lucia was excited to befriend the former teacher of several of her Boston mentors. Shortly thereafter, Ed approached Lucia with a plan – he wanted to start making films again with her. Was she in? Three years later, they combined forces to make *The Axe In The Attic*, a film about the Diaspora of Hurricane Katrina, which premiered at the New York Film Festival in 2007. From 2007 until early 2013, Lucia lived and worked in New York City before she decided to relocate to Vermont to edit *One Cut, One Life* with Ed. Five months after his death, the film premiered at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival and, later that fall, at the 52nd New York Film Festival 2014.

Director's Statement

It is with trepidation that I write without my collaborator and dear friend, Ed Pincus. We co-directed *One Cut, One Life*. It is our final collaboration and Ed's last film before his death in November 2013. So, do I simply cull from early writings? What if I miss something essential? As I grapple with doubts, I am reminded of something Ed would repeatedly tell me, especially when it was clear I would be finishing our film alone, "I trust you, Lucia."

Ed and I had long discussed a simple idea for a film: a personal documentary told from two separate points of view. Ours would be told from two filmmakers of different backgrounds, generations, sexes, and classes — two worlds. Seeds of this idea can be seen in our first film, *The Axe in The Attic* (2007). Ed would call it "a high wire act." I was confident that the two-person concept could work because of what was going on in our lives at this time. We were both immersed in discussions of mortality, love, loss, legacy, and if ever there was a time to take the plunge and make the film, it was now.

A major strength of our collaboration was in our ability to go the distance with our differences, and even despite them. Ed's filmmaking approach is more direct, unapologetic and confident; mine focused more on details, caveats, and emotions—but always with conviction. Some of our most daring and important creative breakthroughs occurred when we pushed and pulled each other in and out of tough places. In the heat of our debates, Ed and I would laugh and acknowledge that we made each other a better filmmaker. Ed once told me that every film he had made was a comedy, and "once you understand that, you understand everything."

Jane, Ed's wife of 50 years, did not initially support this project. In fact, her on-again, off-again resistance to the film evolved into one of its main story-lines. Throughout the process of making *One Cut, One Life*, Ed and I talked at length about what the project meant for Jane and we even considered shelving the film. He and I both understood the stakes. In a grant application we co-wrote in 2012, we said, "There are disturbing and squeamish aspects inherent in this choice. It is challenging and delicate territory." Yet, we would also talk about what the film meant to us, to our collaboration, to our respective bodies of work, and to the form of first person non-fiction film. What could be learned from this tension? We agreed that, "part of the role of the autobiographical filmmaker is to challenge the comfortable assumptions about limits of propriety and good taste, and perhaps to overthrow them."

Rather than slowing us down, Ed's illness created a flurry of creative work, as well as the impetus to delve into difficult emotional territory. We wrote, "When he is filming, he easily immerses himself into something productive, something that extends his creative life. Making another film offers a much-needed crucial distance from his potential fate."

As Ed's condition deteriorated, he and I were literally racing against time. What if Ed died before we finished? Ed and Jane daily navigated the endless doctor appointments and progression of his disease while he and I experimented with new film strategies. Quickly, we decided to focus our writing efforts primarily on Ed's voice- over. We recorded ad lib sessions while driving in the car. It was not a typical way to work. But, nothing could be typical. Ed would even joke, "Will I die on budget?"

For me, *One Cut, One Life* is the third and final film in a trilogy: a woman's exploration of first-person documentary. I have long upheld the notion of the personal being political. It is why I have chosen to work in this form. As a feminist filmmaker, I feel it is essential to examine the power dynamic between male and female voice and the alternating resonance among viewers. I am also interested in exploring the tension and bias around women's roles — married with children vs. single without, older vs. younger, different classes, etc. Moreover, this film has offered me a unique chance to not only honor the memory of two close friends who were tragically killed but also to bear witness to the traumatic realities of violence against women. Ultimately, *One Cut, One Life* has allowed me to pay homage to Ed Pincus, a dear friend and colleague, and his significant role in documentary history.

It is difficult for me to speak to what this film meant to Ed. While working together, he would periodically stress that it was a way for him to focus on his love of filmmaking and living life. He would correct me when I called him "the grandfather of personal doc". "First person non-fiction," he would smile, "father not grandfather." "This film," Ed told me, "is the culmination of my life's work." Perhaps, his explanation of the Aikido term, which became the title of the film, communicates his thoughts best:

"There is this notion in Japanese swordsmanship called 'one cut, one life'... Everything could be the last time. Everything counts. Everything has meaning. When you've trained a long time, your mind disappears. There's something dissociative and it gets in your body. I have lost a lot of that because of my illness, but there's still the notion of extension, of having all your meaning in your movements."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/movies/ed-pincus-ailing-films-one-last-time-with-lucia-small.html>

The New York Times

Grasping at Life, Petals, Pain and All

For Ed Pincus, One Last Film With Lucia Small

By TOM ROSTON

Published: November 8, 2013

ROXBURY, Vt. — “Look up at those leaves and then frame them with your fingers,” Ed Pincus said, facing an enormous maple tree covered in orange and red. He arranged his unsteady hands — he had Parkinson’s since 2009 — so that he could view the leaves’ Technicolor contrast against blue sky. “Now, when you remove the frame, don’t they look different from before?”

Ed Pincus in “One Cut, One Life,” which he directed with Lucia Small. The film deals with deaths, past and future. “We were surprised by how intimate it became,” Ms. Small said.

Capturing life through a viewfinder to see it more clearly, even brilliantly, was what Mr. Pincus had long been known for, first as a Direct Cinema pioneer, documenting a struggling black community in the South during the civil rights movement (“Black Natchez,” 1967) and later as one of the earliest filmmakers to turn the camera on himself and his relationships, including his then-open marriage, in “Diaries” (1982).

Like the first-person documentarians who followed him, including Ross McElwee and Alan Berliner, Mr. Pincus used film as a medium for creation, a vehicle for perception and a tool for living.

During a visit to Vermont six weeks before he died on Tuesday, Mr. Pincus discussed his latest work, “One Cut, One Life,” directed with Lucia Small, 50, and how it attempted the same, but with themes that are especially complex and intimate. In December 2009, one of Ms. Small’s closest friends, the artist Susan Woolf, was murdered. Seven weeks later, another close friend, the film editor Karen Schmeer, her roommate on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, was killed by a driver who was fleeing the police. Then, in 2011, Mr. Pincus was told he had the blood disease myelodysplastic syndrome, which progressed to leukemia. Doctors had predicted he wouldn’t live past March.

“One Cut, One Life” is ostensibly about how the two filmmakers cope with death, in its sudden and protracted forms, but it is something else as well: a meta-exploration of their collaboration itself, and how they both used personal filmmaking to deal with the difficulties of life.

“I wanted to make this documentary for many reasons, one being that film helps contain the pain of the world — it distills it for me,” Ms. Small said. “Another is memory. In three weeks, will we remember that tree? Memories fade. But film captures moments so that they don’t.”

Despite the heavy themes, both directors emphasized that “One Cut, One Life” was about living life well. “My main resistance was ‘not another documentary about someone dying,’ ” Mr. Pincus said. “What a bore.”

“I wasn’t interested in making that film either,” Ms. Small said. “I wanted to make a film told from two points of view.”

She was taking a break from editing in a converted shed on Mr. Pincus’s farm here. She sat on a deck chair while Mr. Pincus sat on his porch steps. Speaking with the pair opened a nonstop volley of perspectives as they complemented, explained and gently contradicted each other. A Brooklyn-born philosophy major, Mr. Pincus described his approach as “ironic distancing,” and that of Ms. Small, a Californian drawn to film for its potential to do good, as more engaged.

Their first collaboration, “The Axe in the Attic” (2007), was a self-reflective journey to New Orleans to bear witness to the impact of Hurricane Katrina. As they interview devastated families, the directors reveal their own responses and sense of powerlessness.

The emotional effects of making that film strained their relationship. But after the deaths of her friends, Mr. Pincus suggested that she “pick up a camera, but not necessarily make a film,” he said. She largely resisted until his diagnosis, then made a counterproposal, that they make a film together. He said he would film her for two days but that she should lock the footage away for 10 years.

That last concept didn’t take hold, even though it had a strong precedent. In 1971, while teaching at M.I.T., Mr. Pincus set out to film his life for five years, and then not look at the results for another five years after that. The upshot was “Diaries.”

As documented in that film, one of Mr. Pincus’s associates, Dennis Sweeney, became mentally unstable and increasingly threatening, prompting Mr. Pincus and his wife, Jane, an artist and a co-author of “Our Bodies, Our Selves,” to leave Boston and take their two children to Vermont. (Mr. Sweeney later murdered the political activist Allard Lowenstein in 1980.) Eventually Mr. Pincus gave up filmmaking and discovered flower farming. But, as he wrote in a journal at the time, without filmmaking, he had “lost part of my soul.”

In 2003, a film festival invitation led to his meeting Ms. Small. “We just clicked,” she said.

Mr. Pincus suggested they work together. By making “Axe in the Attic,” Ms. Small helped “pull Ed out of retirement,” Mr. McElwee said.

In “One Cut, One Life,” Mr. Pincus recalls how, as a boy, he imagined what it would have been like to have only one day to live, and whether he would have chosen to live differently. “I was sure I would,” he said, “And I wouldn’t wear my galoshes, even if it were raining.” But if he had more time, say a month, “would it be different?” he asks.

Mr. Pincus said that making “One Cut, One Life” had helped extend that finite period of living without his galoshes. He described experiencing the “joy of the camera” as he filmed at Third Branch Flower, his idyllic farm.

“One Cut, One Life” also brought Mr. Pincus back to familiar thematic territory from “Diaries,” as his personal connection with Ms. Small threatened to alienate his wife. Mrs. Pincus’s raw responses, captured on film, to affectionate exchanges between the directors revealed one dimension of no-holds-barred first-person filmmaking. “We were very interested in capturing intimacy and closeness,” Ms. Small said. “And we were surprised by how intimate it became.”

Mr. Pincus walked through his kitchen gingerly — he was due for his weekly platelet transfusion the next day — and stole a warm embrace from Mrs. Pincus. Ms. Small was eager to get to the editing room. They had a “deadline,” Ms. Small said — Mr. Pincus laughed at her wording — to get the film ready for festivals.

He pointed out a slow-falling leaf that was temporarily lifted by the wind. “The gift of terminal diagnosis was that it opened me to the world,” he said. “And it gave Lucia an opportunity to hold on.”

Creative Team

ED PINCUS (co-director, producer) began filmmaking in 1964, developing a direct cinema approach to filming social and political problems. He has credits as producer, director, and cinematographer on all of his films, and was cinematographer on many additional films throughout his career. Pincus' filmmaking was always on the technical cutting edge—e.g., the early use of color in natural light situations and the development of single-person filming techniques. A recipient of a Guggenheim Fellowship (1972) and several grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, he started and developed the MIT film section where he influenced a generation of filmmakers. Pincus was Visiting Filmmaker at Minneapolis College of Art and Design and Visiting Filmmaker for three years at Harvard University. He authored the highly acclaimed book *Guide to Filmmaking* (1968); and co-authored *The Filmmaker's Handbook* (1984, 1999, 2013) with Steven Ascher. In the early '80s, after abruptly retiring from filmmaking due to threats on his life, Pincus moved his family to Vermont where he eventually built a successful commercial flower farm. Twenty years later, in 2005, Pincus returned to filmmaking to collaborate with Lucia Small on *The Axe in the Attic* (2007), about the Diaspora of Hurricane Katrina and the role of witness.

Pincus' early films include: *Black Natchez* (1967), a documentary that follows the aftermath of a car bombing in a Southern town during the Civil Rights movement; *Panola* (1965), a portrait of a wino, alleged police informant, and follower of Malcolm X; *One Step Away* (1967), an intimate portrait of a hippie commune in California during the Summer of Love; *Life and Other Anxieties* (1977) co-directed with Steven Ascher, part personal documentary and part experiment in the mode of cinema vérité; and *Diaries: (1971-1976)* (1981) an intimate portrait about his own family, friends, and (open) marriage. Inspired, in part, by the effects of women's liberation, *Diaries* is considered the seminal film in defining the possibilities of what came to be called "personal documentary". *Le Monde*, in a front-page review, called *Diaries*, "an epic work that redefines an art, forcing us to rethink what we thought we knew about the Cinema".

In 2007, *The Axe in the Attic* premiered at the New York Film Festival and screened at various festivals, including Cinema du Reel, Torino Film Festival, and Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. A few years later, when Pincus was diagnosed with Parkinson's, he and Small began discussing possible film topics. But, it was not until late 2011, shortly after Pincus was diagnosed with MDS, (a precursor to Acute Myeloid Leukemia), when the former collaborators decided to make *One Cut, One Life*. Small and Pincus were able to complete most of the film together before his death on November 5, 2013.

LUCIA SMALL (co-director, editor, producer) is a 20-year veteran independent filmmaker. In 2005, she teamed up with seminal documentarian Ed Pincus to co-direct, edit and produce *The Axe in the Attic* (2007), a story about the Diaspora of Hurricane Katrina and the role of witness. The film had its world premiere at the New York Film Festival and screened at various festivals worldwide, including the Human Rights Watch International Film Festival, Cinema du Reel, Torino Film Festival, and Full Frame Documentary Film Festival. Distributed by Cinema Guild and IndiePix, *The Axe in the Attic* was broadcast on the Documentary Channel.

Small's directorial debut *My Father, The Genius* (2002), about her visionary architect father, garnered several top festival awards, including the Grand Jury Prizes for Best Documentary and Best Editing (edited by Karen Schmeer) at the Slamdance Film Festival, and a First Appearances nomination at International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA). Distributed by C.S. Associates and New Yorker Films, *My Father, The Genius* was broadcast internationally and domestically showcased on the Sundance Channel.

Small's early film experience includes working in both narrative and non-fiction form. She produced several independent projects for ITVS, American Public Television, and PBS. Credits include: Katrina Brown's *Traces of The Trade*, Laurel Chiten's *The Jew in The Lotus*, Beth Harrington's *The Blinking Madonna and Other Miracles*, Maureen Foley's *American Wake*, Steven Kijak's *Never Met Picasso*, and John Junkerman's *The Mississippi River Song*. When Small is not directing and editing her own work, she edits documentary films, including Bruce Twickler's *Broadside* (2009) and Lyda Kuth's directorial debut *Love and Other Anxieties* (2011).

Supported by the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program and the LEF Foundation, *One Cut, One Life* (2014) was invited in 2013 as a work-in-progress to IFP's Independent Feature Market and the Sundance Institute's Documentary and Story Edit Labs. Small and Pincus were able to complete most of the film before his passing in November 2013. She finished the film in April 2014 for its world premiere at the Full Frame Documentary Film Festival.

MARY KERR (producer) is a media arts professional who has been working in the fields of film festival programming, documentary producing, and arts administration for more than 15 years. Currently, she is Manager of Creative Capital's Professional Development Program, which creates workshops designed to teach artists the tools and strategies to transform their careers. Prior to Creative Capital, she was the Executive Director of The Flaherty, producer of the annual Robert Flaherty Film Seminar, which encourages filmmakers and other artists to explore the potential of the moving image.

She began her media arts career as a film programmer, programming for the Sundance, Los Angeles, Gen Art, and Maryland Film Festivals, and in 2003, became Director of Programming for the SILVERDOCS: AFI/Discovery Channel Documentary Festival. She has served on funding panels for the NEA, NYSCA, ITVS, POV, Tribeca Gucci Fund; juries for the Ashland, Full Frame, Sarasota, US Comedy Arts, and Nordisk Panorama Film Festivals; and sits on the board of New York Film Video Council. She holds a B.S. in Journalism from University of Maryland and currently lives in Brooklyn, NY.

DANIELLE MORGAN (associate editor, assistant producer), an award-winning filmmaker, began her career by creating experimental narrative films on super8, editing in camera or with a splicer and tape. She went on to earn a master's degree in film at New York University's Tisch School of the Arts where she was awarded a Graduate Assistant position in Editing and a Hollywood Foreign Press Award for her thesis film, *Deadbeat*. A post-production professional living in Brooklyn, Danielle has collaborated with

numerous award-winning filmmakers and organizations including Lynn Shelton, Guy Maddin, Laura Poitras, Killer films and Lincoln Center. She is currently working with her wife, actor/writer Katherine E. Scharhon, on their first feature, *Rules for Drowning*.